



SPECIAL SECTION

Unavowed value

Economy, comparison, and hierarchy in Dakar

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According to Louis Dumont, comparison is the starting point of any anthropological analysis: an experiment that elicits differences to provide ideas and justify analytical standpoints. Yet what difference might fuel a comparative experiment in a global African metropolis such as Dakar, the capital of Senegal? I suggest a comparison with the autonomy and primacy of the economic in Euro-America to produce a radical contrast. This text first examines Dumont's work on the "economic" as a value conflicting with the political in Euro-America. Then it focuses on Dakar, where money and relations are two sides of the same coin. Following the money trail, it explores Dakar's sociality, in which women's exchange ceremonies of birth and marriage are more highly valued than the local economy, yet vividly condemned in discourses as a local custom preventing the full realization of economic development and Islam. Confronting these moral contradictions and the primacy of women's exchange ceremonies over the economic in Dakar's sociality, the text proposes to distinguish between morality and values and acknowledges women's ceremonies as an "unavowed" value. It then argues that moral contradictions of this kind mark the contrast between different levels of value and the existence of a hierarchy that articulates incompatible conceptions within the same social formation.

Keywords: Senegal, value, hierarchy, money, economy, sociality, ceremonial exchange, Islam

"It's the economy, stupid!"

Louis Dumont's comparative method is radical and purposely unimaginative. As Dumont (1991: 8) put it: "I don't have any idea, comparison provides it." Dumont's perspective is not radical because it drastically intensifies cultural differences, but rather because its epistemology is radical: comparison has no a priori object. It is an



experiment in which differences are elicited to provide ideas and justify analytical standpoints.

I propose in this article that a city such as Dakar, the capital of Senegal, be treated as a challenge for comparative anthropology along the lines of Dumont's project. Dakar is a West African metropolis with a population of three million. It is the capital of an independent and virtually democratic state, and a place that has seen massive emigration and immigration. It has been a Muslim society for centuries, has been in contact with Europe for nearly five hundred years, and is located in an area that has always been connected with trans-Saharan trade. In other words, Dakar represents an obvious vantage point for a study of globalization, social change, or cultural hybridization. Yet it is not the ideal place for eliciting radical differences. The intertwining of modernity with tradition, of the local with the global, makes it almost impossible to draw a comparison on any given cultural element—especially the most enticing for those who seeks out difference—without immediately essentializing it.

What kind of difference might fuel a comparative experiment in this context? In this article, I suggest an answer, famously coined by Bill Clinton: "It's the economy, stupid!" A familiar and problematic category indeed, and not one of most appealing from an exoticist point of view.

Let's begin by highlighting different ways of enacting comparison. Marcel Detienne's book *Comparing the incomparable* (2008) is a vibrant manifesto for a comparative method that roots out differences and denies the irreducible singularity of the things compared. In the second chapter, "Constructing comparables," he gives a vivid description of how he began his comparative enterprise and outlines his method. It all started with stimulating exchanges within a small group of historians and anthropologists gathered around a common question—namely, "What is a site?" Then, "in order to access the teeming variety of modes of territorialization," they felt the need "to select a category, making sure that it was generic enough to allow the beginnings of a comparison but neither too general nor too specific to any particular culture" (ibid.: 25). In other words, Detienne's comparative method seeks out differences but still relies on a generic question ("What is a site?") that defines the starting point. Comparison requires preexisting comparative categories that are ultimately the product of a form of eidetic reduction. In contrast, Dumont's radical comparative perspective doesn't start with a generic object or question. It foregrounds difference as the absolute fulcrum (Dumont 1977: 11) upon which comparison draws exclusively. This is so because, according to Dumont, the meaning of a single feature, however important, can only be grasped from its relations with other particular features within a given social formation. "A particular feature, if taken not in itself but in its concrete position within a system, . . . can have a totally different meaning according to the position it occupies. That is to say, from a sociological standpoint it is actually different" (Dumont 1980: 253). One must always take into account the relative value of any element within the configuration to which it belongs. In other words, the hierarchy (i.e., value relations) present in each configuration is essential. However, there is much that is implicit in any configuration and especially its fundamental tenets, that is to say, value relations (Dumont 1977: 19–20). Thus, the issue with comparison is not merely that we cannot avoid



“misunderstanding others’ views,” but also that we are required to deal with the implicit dimension of both “their” views and “ours.” According to Dumont (1986: 8), the only way to explore this complexity “is when comparison shows discord between two different hierarchies.” Each comparison, thus, can only uncover a partial aspect, and yet evinces necessary but unexpressed relations on which the analysis can draw afterward. Dumont repeated many times that this kind of comparison is a recursive and an almost endless process. He has always been very elusive on where and how it should start. In his work, the anthropologist appears somehow compelled by ethnography to rediscover a familiar but problematic notion of our common thought, which provides a comparative perspective (in Dumont’s case, India elicited hierarchy: *ibid.*: 7).

Drawing on Dumont’s work on economy as a value in Euro-America, and my ethnography in Thiaroye-sur-Mer, a Wolof-speaking poor suburb of Dakar, in this article I explore Dakar’s sociality, in which women’s ceremonial exchanges are more highly valued than the local economy but unanimously condemned in the name of both economic rationality and Islam. I then develop the argument that comparison can also reveal whether moral contradictions evince a conflict between competing values or eclipse an unavowed hierarchy.

Economy as a value

Dumont’s work was profoundly inspired by Karl Polanyi’s book *The great transformation* (1944), and especially by his fundamental thesis on the disembedding of economies from society. According to Dumont, Polanyi demonstrated that the constitution of the economic components of social life in a separate subsystem that subordinates the rest, which took place over the course of the nineteenth century, was an exceptional event in human history. Dumont’s first comparative work on Euro-America addressed the autonomy and primacy of the economic aspect as a key expression of individualism, and as the triumph of a form of social life marked by the separation and unresolved tension between economics and politics (Dumont 1977). He repeatedly praised *The great transformation* as an anthropological masterpiece (Dumont 1977, 1983, 1986, 1994), and helped bring Polanyi’s ideas to a French audience.¹ He was also a fierce critic of Polanyi’s subsequent work (1957) as an economic anthropologist.² His criticism revolved around the definition of the word “economic.”

Polanyi made a famous distinction between two meanings of the term, one formal and the other substantive:

The substantive meaning of economic derives from man’s dependence for his living upon nature and his fellows. It refers to the interchange with his natural and social environment, in so far as this results in supplying him with the means of material want-satisfaction. The

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1. Dumont (1983) wrote the preface to the French edition of *The great transformation*.
 2. The idea of an economic (or a political) anthropology “does not make sense with respect to the progress of knowledge” (Dumont 1986: 105).

formal meaning of economic derives from the logical character of the means–ends relationship, as apparent in such words as “economical” or “economizing.” It refers to a definite situation of choice, namely, that between the different uses of means induced by an insufficiency of those means. (Polanyi 1957: 243)

For Polanyi, the formalist definition only applied to market economies, whereas the substantive definition was universal, and thus of use to comparative anthropology. This distinction gave rise to a vigorous debate in the 1960s, which saw two trends in economic anthropology (formalist and substantivist) taking opposite sides on how to identify the economic aspect in comparative anthropology (Isaac 2005).

Dumont took an original—and yet overlooked—position in this debate. He argued that, contra Polanyi, the question of the status of the economy in social formations alone could not lead to an anthropological comparison, because it assumes the empirical existence of “the economy” as an external reality present in any given social formation. On the contrary, according to Dumont, the primacy of the economic dimension is not the disembedding of a fundamental domain of social life that is or was already present: “It should be obvious that there is nothing like an economy out there, unless and until men construct such an object” (Dumont 1986: 33). Dumont’s methodological stance is not, however, to disclose an error or a truth regarding the mode of existence of the economy (e.g., Latour and Lépinay 2009). From a comparative point a view, the economy is a construct, and not a given on which a plurality of competing definitions³ may be identified but none is beyond discussion. Instead, according to Dumont (1977: 24), one should start from Polanyi’s thesis on the primacy of the economic dimension and identify the presupposition on which the object of economics is constructed in the location of this same object in Euro-American social formations. In *From Mandeville to Marx*, he studied the genesis of economics as an intellectual category distinct from politics. One of his conclusions was that “the economic category rests on a value judgment, an implicit hierarchy. It supposes that something else is excluded or subordinated” (ibid.: 26). Dumont never sought to define economics, or to compare it with something else (such as a cosmology, a religion, or a culture). Instead, he drew on a comparative difference to elicit a value: the autonomy and primacy of the economic dimension as a peculiar feature of Euro-American social formations. The economic category can be defined not in itself, but as a function of its value relation with other categories, especially the move, described by Polanyi, toward a value-encompassing relation of the economic over the political (Dumont 1986: 104–12).

Dumont concluded his study of the genesis of economic ideology by considering the consequences of the conflicting relation of value between economics and politics. He was perplexed by well-meaning thinkers—and especially economists such as Keynes—who proposed that we cease behaving like slaves of the economic process and downgrade the economy to the status of a means for achieving “the real human ends, which are social” (Dumont 1977: 107). For Dumont, a program such as this would most likely fail, or succeed at the cost of weakening or destroying the individual as a value. According to him,

3. Many of these assume, for that matter, that “the economy” is a given.



In such a case, we should likely return to subordination, unless we are able to produce at short notice a consensus bearing a still unseen third path. “The economic” is a major category of our thought, and constraints inherent to our ideology are such that we are not at liberty to decree that, from now on, it will be downgraded to the rank of a servant. (Dumont 1977: 107)

In the second French edition of *From Mandeville to Marx*, Dumont felt the need to introduce a clarification of his views. “Until further notice, subordination in its natural form, as a value, is excluded from our ideology. It would therefore only be reintroduced in a shameful, pathological form, that is to say, as oppression” (Dumont [1977] 1985: 132). Two pages later, he concludes: “So far, the choice between wealth as an end and forced, pathological, forms of subordination is our fate” (ibid.: 134).

Dumont’s contention, and especially the last conclusion, may appear to be an uncompromising neoliberal view; however, his true position is radically different. This is not a claim on the order of facts that would, for example, call into question the legitimacy of or possibility for a political body to act upon the economy as an external, objective reality. Rather, it is a warning about the limits and constraints exerted by value systems on power, especially on what Dumont called “artificialism”: the idea that power or strength of will has an unlimited capacity to fully transform the world in accordance with an ideal and therefore to sift the good aspects, which will be kept, from the bad, which will be discarded. “Ideology has the power to transform social reality only between certain limits and when we ignore those limits we produce the contrary of what was desired” (Dumont 1977: 12). Dumont’s aim was neither to naturalize nor to eradicate power, but to understand its limits. His work is haunted by totalitarianism, and he repeatedly highlighted the dangers and tragic consequences of the idea that power can transform society rapidly and fundamentally. “There are other limits to modern artificialism than those ecology has begun to teach us, limits that follow from the social nature of man as thinking being” (ibid.: 108). For Dumont (1986: 92), artificialism clashes with society as whole, not in the corporate sense of a group that would oppose a resistance to change (brought by another group) in the name of moral principles (Thompson 1971), but as a system of values.

The question of the economy illustrates particularly vividly the limits imposed by a system of values. The autonomy of the economic dimension has tangible consequences, a set of constraints that seem to impose themselves on social formations that politics is not able to fully control. This situation is dramatically illustrated by the consequences of economic and financial globalization in general, especially in recent years, and portrays the predicaments of Western states that are struggling with markets against a background of financial crisis and social turmoil. However, according to Dumont, the autonomy and primacy of the economic dimension is neither the expression of an objective fact (social formations are subjected to natural “economic laws”) nor the result of a power relation between social units and ideas (such as class struggles, the power of finance, or government corruption). The autonomy and primacy of the economic dimension is a paramount value, which, like any value, can never be fully realized. However, this value includes a

claim—or a tendency—to move toward a value-encompassing relation over the whole of society,⁴ thereby challenging the political.

Dumont is also one of the few commentators on Polanyi to explicitly agree with the other major thesis of *The great transformation*: that the emancipation of the economic domain is a major social and ideological fact, but that at an empirical level, economic liberalism combines with its opposite. This is what Polanyi (1944: 136) calls the “double movement”: market societies are constituted by a movement of liberalism to expand the scope of the market, and a countermovement resisting the “disembedding” of the economy. Polanyi’s double movement is a fair illustration of what Joel Robbins refers to as “hierarchical dynamism” in his contribution to this issue: a value is never homogeneously dominant; it is always found in combination with other values, in this case economy and political power (Dumont 1994: 8–9). Dumont (1983: xv) writes in this regard: “One can observe in the economic field something called otherwise the ‘coexistence of opposites.’ It is an empirical coexistence, more or less obscure or shameful, a kind of mixture with no specific formula.”

In sum, Dumont’s contention, contra Polanyi, is that the economic domain is not a comparative object. However, the autonomy and primacy of the economic dimension as a “modern Euro-American” value, conflicting with politics, contains a comparative potential for anthropology, provided that it elicits a difference between social formations. In the comparative experiment that follows, I compare Dumont’s view of the economy and the limits a value system imposes on artificialism with my ethnography of Dakar. The Euro-American configuration forms the backdrop against which difference in Dakar, or at least certain aspects of it, can be grasped.

Money in Dakar

I will start again by highlighting a contrast. In Euro-America, although everyday life requires money almost constantly, entire sectors of social life function through a minimization or condemnation of the circulation of money and the idea of a distinction between intimacy and economy. In Dakar, on the other hand, there is no domain in social life in which money does not play a continuing role. Money is central to the economy as well as matrimonial relations and kinship (from solidarity between relatives to the countless exchanges of cash that take place during family ceremonies), politics (such as through patronage and corruption), or religious practices (Muslim disciples offer cash to their religious masters every time they visit them). Thus, everyone seems to be permanently engaged in a quest for what they call “means”: that is, money. However, the centrality of money in social life, its penetration into the heart of intimacy, the constant haggling and the seeming generalization of venality, does not imply that sociality is a global market in which every relation can be bought or sold. Here, we are skirting the debate on the corrosive power of money, which goes back at least to Greek antiquity, and is one of

4. Political economy, according to Polanyi (1944: 116–35), is the very discovery of the existence of society in the modern sense. Humans are linked by relations of economic interdependence. They form an “economic society,” subject to laws that are not human, but natural laws.



anthropology's greatest achievements as a discipline. After intense discussions on money, commodity, and social transformation, anthropologists have contradicted Aristotle, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Marx and put an end to this debate (see, e.g., Bloch and Parry 1989; Geschiere 2000; Akin and Robbins 2001). Everyone is now more or less in agreement that the equivalence between monetarization and commodification is an error. This does not mean that the pervasive presence of money in Dakar's social life is harmless and of no consequence: money is the most valuable form of relationship, and mediates not only commodity or economic relations, but all social relations. Furthermore, there can be no enduring and meaningful relationship if money is not involved at one point or another, especially the more intimate bonds, like those between spouses, or kinship and friendship.

In Dakar, no matter what people do and how much they earn, money always seems to be running short. Obviously, it is scarce because most people in Dakar are poor and have very low incomes, but there is also a deeper, sociological, reason. The scarcity of money is combined with two other elements: firstly, because money and social relations are two sides of the same coin, people are constantly engaged in numerous financial relationships, from credit–debt or business to payments of all kinds during family ceremonies, contributions to prayer groups or local associations, and so on; and, secondly, because of the moral value of solidarity (Marie 1997, 2000), whoever has money must cope with continuing demands from a constantly needy entourage: friends, neighbors, and especially relatives. For example, a young man who had found a good wage-paying job at the Senegalese National Telecommunications Company (SONATEL) described the “moral imperative” of solidarity to me as follows:

My family owns this house. There was still room in the courtyard when I got the SONATEL job, so I built a bedroom wing and got married. I also bought a small motorcycle to go to work and move around. It's been a year now. I'm trying to save money with Ahmed, my older brother, and hopefully, if everything goes well, we will be able to afford to connect our house to the water mains. From this point of view, I can't complain. Here, with a salary, you earn esteem and consideration, that's for sure. But in fact, I don't have any more money than before, when I was unemployed. Now, almost every day, someone comes here and talks to me about one problem or another. And almost every time, I have to give money to somebody. I'm not only speaking of my wife here. Relatives, friends, it's everyone, every day. This is my main problem. The problem is that I am bombarded.

Anyone who might have some cash, especially a salaried employee, a migrant living abroad, or an ethnographer, is under permanent and continuous fire from claims and demands of all kinds from relatives, friends, neighbors, creditors, commercial partners, and so on.

Agency: Sociality and illiquidity

In Dakar, people cope with these “bombardments” by putting their cash out of reach: liquidity (i.e., cash) is converted in financial relations. Some literally put a

physical distance between themselves and their money. For example, one woman opened a bank account on the opposite side of town. Accessing her savings was expensive because she had to pay the bus fare to go to the bank and return home. Most of the time, however, money is put out of reach by converting liquidity into mutual debt, especially in rotating savings and credit associations, or “tontines.” A tontine is a group of persons, usually women, who gather for a series of meetings. Each member contributes to a collective “pot,” which is then given to one member, who is subsequently excluded from receiving the pot in future meetings, while still being obliged to contribute to it. The meeting process is repeated until each member has received the pot. The order in which they do so is decided at the beginning of the process, usually by the leader of the group (the “mother” of the tontine). Once money circulates in a tontine, or is lent to someone, or is engaged in any kind of credit relationship, it is out of reach for a given period of time. In this way, people save money without keeping any cash. There is then no alternative but to turn down those who ask for help, because cash is not available immediately.

Money is thus put out of reach in numerous financial networks. In other words, financial management is based on an “illiquidity preference” (Shipton 1990: 16–19). If liquidity, as Keynes stated ([1936] 1973: 293), is a link between the present and the future, it takes the form here not of speculative hoarding, but of a network of relations. Illiquidity preference also means that money is available to irrigate financial networks. The velocity of money is extremely high, because no cash is left idle. People often say that cash burns their fingers: as soon as it is received, it is either spent or converted into a financial relation, as an “investment,” as my interlocutors—and especially women—often put it. Financial relations form numerous circuits, each of which has a different temporality, which may be from a few days to several years, hence the importance of synchronization of the financial networks. Financial networks, which are mostly managed by women, are not simply the financial basis of the local economy; because money is the most valuable form of relation, they are also, and above all, the warp and woof of sociality.

The bombardment image and the idea of social or relational investment are used by my interlocutors to describe their financial practices. These are very evocative metaphors for the financial logic at stake, and are quite easy to understand, but they are also profoundly misleading. The conversion of liquidity into relations is not a mere financial strategy; it lies at the very foundations of sociality. Illiquidity is the means by which people manage their relations. In a monetarized and pervasive sociality such as Dakar’s, it is the very condition for action. Agency hinges on two elements: firstly, the conversion of liquidity into financial relationships; and, secondly, the synchronization of financial relations—that is, the possibility of having access to cash when it is needed. The trouble here is that the temporality of the various sociofinancial relations in which a person is involved is never homogeneous.

In Dakar, only lifecycle ceremonies in which women ostentatiously exchange hundreds of gifts to honor kinship relations can efficiently synchronize financial networks in order to gather large amounts of money, whereas one of the basic propositions of economics is that only markets can synchronize in this way.



Hierarchy: Economy and ceremonial exchanges

Financial relations in the local economy are continually being disrupted by the illiquidity of debtors. On the supply side, the illiquidity preference is indeed a means of making savings and thus a way of financing investment, but on the demand side, it is also a significant insolvency factor. Furthermore, small businesspeople have to cope with the constant claims and problems of their relatives, in a context where there is no distinction between the money allocated to households and businesses. In order to maintain their economic activities, people strive to separate commercial circuits from the rest of their sociofinancial relations as clearly as possible, especially to preserve working capital (Guerin 2003, 2006; Moya forthcoming). In general, people find it very hard to successfully synchronize even a small number of sociofinancial networks at the same time in order to maintain or develop their economic activities. Likewise, because solidarity is always a relation between two individuals, even in the case of an unexpected problem such as illness, people can never activate more than a few relations in their search for funds unless they have a wealthy relative who is able to support them (i.e., in this context, a migrant or someone earning a salary).

On the other hand, ceremonies performed by women for lifecycle events, especially birth and marriage ceremonies, usually mobilize dozens of the very same financial networks (Moya 2004; Buggenhagen 2012). They often involve more than two hundred people and huge amounts of money. It is not unusual to see more than one year of an entire household's annual income collected in just a few days and put into circulation for a birth ceremony by one woman in a single evening. In marriage and birth ceremonies, women exchange money and clothes to honor kinship relationships, especially affinity. It is impossible to describe the complex logic of the ceremonial exchange system here owing to lack of space, but it might be summarized by saying that the ceremonial gifts among women in birth and marriage ceremonies represent the manner by which affinity and the succession of generations are construed as having value, and become operative in the order of social relations (Moya forthcoming).

Women's exchange ceremonies are the only events that can ensure the synchronization of all of a person's sociofinancial relations and their transformation into cash. For example, in each tontine (rotating savings and credit association), the order of recipients is fixed at the beginning of each cycle. Regardless of the purpose of the tontine (savings, business, clothing, or a ceremony), if a participant (and almost all of them are women) is involved in a marriage or birth ceremony, she will be systematically moved to the top of the list, thereby disrupting any expectations the remaining recipients might have, or any calculations they might have made. Every woman involved in a ceremony also brings or sends a gift of money—called *ndawtal*—for one of the main actors of the ceremony they have come to support, whether it be a relative, a friend, or a neighbor. *Ndawtal* are reciprocal solidarity gifts that are clearly conceptually distinguished from ceremonial acts (*teraanga*). Every *ndawtal* received will require a return of twice⁵ the sum given initially. Each

5. “Twice” meaning giving back the initial gift and then honoring (*teral*) the giver for his or her previous gift with an identical one; this is the Wolofs' concept of reciprocity.

ndawtal is recorded in a ledger, which the recipient is supposed to consult (but usually women have a very precise memory of it) prior to the next ceremony (birth or marriage). While people who lend money usually struggle to get it back, no one is ever concerned in the case of *ndawtal*. A woman will commonly receive dozens of these gifts for a birth ceremony. In other words, unlike solidarity or economic activities, lifecycle ceremonies organized by women activate numerous financial networks simultaneously in order to honor kinship relations through ceremonial gifts, thereby collecting funds that it would be impossible to raise for any other purpose. I carried out a limited survey of 350 individuals that suggests that women's ceremonial funding mobilizes nearly one-third of overall savings.

The sociofinancial system in Dakar has a peculiar morphology. There are no boundaries between financial spheres of exchange (Bohannan 1955) comparable to those described by numerous authors, such as Parker Shipton (1989) among the Luo of Keyna, Sharon Hutchinson (1996) among the Nuer of Sudan, Jean and John Comaroff (1990) among the Tshidi of South Africa, or Viviana Zelizer (1994) in American households in the 1940s (see also Bloch and Parry 1989). In each case, moral boundaries are drawn between financial spheres of exchange, which in some cases can be overcome by forms of conversion (Guyer 2004). For example, among the Luo of Kenya (Shipton 1989), money obtained from theft, won in a lottery, or gained from the sale of lineage land, gold, tobacco, or cannabis is considered "bitter": that is, dangerous and associated with spirits. It cannot be used for transactions involving kinship relations unless purification ceremonies are performed. In Dakar, there is one single monetary circuit without moral boundaries of any kind, especially when it comes to ceremonial exchanges: the origins of money given at a ceremony to honor a relative are of no concern to the recipient and vice versa. It is very common to use a 500 CFA franc note received at a ceremony for the fare back home, or to purchase the next morning's breakfast. Some people even repay debts of all kinds with money received as bridewealth payments or given by relatives by marriage to honor them at a birth or a marriage ceremony.

Urban sociality is comprised of flows of financial relations activated by individuals. It is not structured by morally bounded spheres of exchange. Sociality is hierarchized⁶ in terms of agency: that is, the capacity to synchronize relations and convert them into cash. In the local financial system, and thus in sociality, economy is subordinated to women's ceremonies. This is not to suggest that women's exchanges in marriage and birth ceremonies collect more money than anything else: in absolute terms, more money circulates in the economy than in women's ceremonies. Nor is it the case that the entire economy of Dakar is organized through ceremonial exchanges or even relationality. Rather, my argument is that from the point of view of finance and agency, women's ceremonial exchanges are valued more highly than economics. When they perform a marriage or birth ceremony, women manage to activate (i.e., to synchronize and convert into cash) all the financial relations they are involved in, whereas this is not possible for economic (or any other) purposes. On the contrary, economic life suffers from the desynchronization of

6. In the Dumontian sense that some motives are valued more highly than others (Dumont 1986: 269).



financial relations, and the illiquidity preference generates structural insolvability and a constant disruption of financial temporalities.

The hierarchy between the economy and ceremonies in Dakar is meaningful from a comparative perspective: that is, from the point of view of the primacy of the economic dimension in Euro-America. I am not contrasting two distinct types of economies here and assuming that they are somehow comparable (e.g., as a gift economy and a commodity economy). My argument rests on the placement of two very different economic forms within two different social formations: primacy and autonomy in relation to politics in Euro-America, and subordination in relation to ceremonies in Dakar. This comparison both elicits and justifies the purpose of an investigation, and in this case the purpose is not women's birth and marriage exchange ceremonies as such, but a value: the primacy of these ceremonies in Dakar's sociality.

Perplexity and custom (*aada*)

Financial hierarchy is a structural fact, but not a matter of morality: men and women constantly complain about ceremonial expenses, and denounce them as a waste (*yaax*) of money. Of course, my interlocutors in Dakar also usually acknowledge that feasting and performing family ceremonies, especially gift exchanges, is prestigious, and even fun. Everyone, especially women, has a lot to say when it comes to ceremonies: how they are absurdly costly, yet very pleasant, events (*neex*); how this or that ceremony should be performed; how this or that ceremony has been performed; how this ceremonial gift was carried out, or how this or that praise was offered—rightly or wrongly; how this (e.g., Muslim rituals) is absolutely mandatory, or that (e.g., bridewealth or ceremonial gifts) is optional; how there are times when one should not skimp on expenses and times when one should not spend too much, and so on. In other words, everyone has an opinion on a number of issues, and each ceremony gives rise to numerous comments. Organizing and attending and spending large sums of money on lifecycle ceremonies is something of an inevitable fact, for women in particular, even though everyone also complains about the excessive spending, and condemns these ceremonies as wasteful events. The amount of money mobilized and spent in ceremonies perplexes my interlocutors deeply. For example, a few days after a birth ceremony that she had organized (she spent more than one million CFA francs that day), Sokhna S., a forty-five-year-old woman, said to me:

You know, in France, downtown [i.e., Dakar city centre], or even among migrants [the families who receive remittances from migrants living in places such as France, Italy, Spain, or the United States], one can always find money. Here it is not good: family ceremonies exhaust everyone, especially the girl's mother [the person who organizes marriage and birth ceremonies]. It is so hard for her. But even those who receive a lot, they never manage to keep something at the end of the day. Everybody condemns that. Every one of us. Even me. I disagree with this enormous waste. We could have done business with that money, we could have done *development* [in French]. I am an activist for development. Ceremonial

events (*xew*) . . . our husbands, they also moan about them all the time. . . . But you know, these are just words. We only talk. And we do the ceremonies, that's all. That's what we do here, we do ceremonies, *maximum!* [in French, then she laughs] That's the way it goes.

I will now focus on the nature of this apparent contradiction and the feeling of perplexity that stems from it.

When asked why they need to perform ceremonies, or why so many people and so much money come together on these occasions, my interlocutors' answer has always been the same: "It is our *aada*" (*suñu aada la*). This answer is hard to understand. The word *aada* comes from Arabic, and is in common use from Senegal to Indonesia (*aadet*). In Wolof, it means "custom." The term does not convey any idea of tradition in the sense of continuity, repetition over time, or practices inherited from the past, however, whether from ancestors or relatives from a previous generation. Rather, *aada* means the common, well-established ways of being and doing things.

When my interlocutors gave me this answer, it was obviously a way of signifying the difference between how they do things such as ceremonies and how they imagine white "Euro-Americans" (*tubab*) like me do comparable things. But it has never been a justification based on tradition: in fact, the term *aada* is also often used more or less explicitly to signify a synchronic distinction. People distinguish their own *aada* from that of others: for example, to compare the Wolof ways of doing things with those peculiar to other regional ethnic groups such as the Serer (*seereer*), Tukolor (*haalpulaar'en*), or Moors (*naar*). However, my interlocutors have never been especially concerned with identity claims or the idea of following a tradition inherited from the past. Furthermore, the term *aada* not only signifies an external differentiation (us versus others); it also distinguishes one particular type of institution and practice from another, especially when it comes to the financial dimensions of women's ceremonial practices. There are numerous types of costly and ostentatious gifts: mutual exchanges (*joqalante*) based on civility and honor; ceremonial gifts that honor relations (*teraanga*) and counter-gifts (*njukkal*); bride-wealth payments (*may bu jëkk* and *warugar*); the various gifts before (*waajtaay*) and during (*yeebi*) ceremonies celebrating the entry of the bride into her husband's home; the various gifts before (*ruy*) and during birth ceremonies, especially gifts to honor female husbands (*teral njëkke*)⁷ or affinity in general (*teral goro*); gifts before a journey to and from Mecca; offerings to affines during Ramadan (*suukaru koor*); or reciprocal gifts for ceremonial support (*ndawtal*). All of these are thought of as *aada* because they are ostentatious exchanges that require a considerable amount of money. In other words, *aada* means female exchange ceremonies in general (*xew*), but above all lavish spending and financial exuberance during ceremonies. In this sense, the custom (*aada*) designates what seems a priori to be its most modern

7. In Wolof, a woman calls her husband *jëkker* and his sisters (in a very broad sense; the term for sister being *jigeen*, which means woman) are called *njëkke*, or sometimes *jëkker* as well. Both the husband and his "sisters" call the wife "*jabar*." In other words, a marriage relation is composed of a wife (*jabar*), her husband (*jëkker*), and her female husbands (*njëkke*).



dimension, namely the financial aspect of female ceremonies. One of my interlocutors, alternating between French and Wolof, explained to me:

Awa [in French]: This should be nothing but reasonable mutual aid. But whenever we can, we lapse into folklore. Islam condemns it. Folklore . . .

Ismaël [in French]: Folklore? What do you mean?

Awa [in French and Wolof]: Folklore, you know. . . . *All of this is aada. Here, we put aada everywhere. Here, we go too far at every opportunity. Money matters, clothes, teraanga and the like, this is aada, folklore. Ceremonies, exuberant expenses, squandering, this is our aada.*

Custom (*aada*) is also thought of as negative and harmful. We do not, therefore, find justification of a particular culture in relation to a hegemonic culture comparable to the one Dumont (1994) studied in the case of Germany facing French revolutionary ideas. It is the exact opposite: according to my interlocutors, financial exuberance in birth and marriage ceremonies is not only a local cultural idiosyncrasy but, above all, constitutes a formidable obstacle that inhibits the full realization of universal values: development and Islam.

Contradictions: Economic development and Islam

My interlocutors usually say that money spent on ceremonies is “wasted” (*yaax*) because otherwise it could be invested in economic activities. The structural adjustment programs imposed on the Senegalese government by the IMF in the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of the debt crisis and the neoliberal policies of the last two decades have significantly reduced the role of the postcolonial state, partly to the benefit of NGOs. Numerous organizations dedicated to development operate in Dakar. Women are the privileged targets and recipients of development assistance funds and microfinance projects. These financial flows irrigate the local financial system, but are of limited effectiveness owing to issues of financial mismanagement that are largely attributable not only to embezzlement but also to ceremonial expenditure (Ndione 1992; Guerin 2006). In the last twenty-five years, the Senegalese state (government, municipalities, and paragonovernmental organizations), international agencies, NGOs, and microfinance institutions have dedicated a good deal of energy and resources to advertising good governance and development. A local consequence of this global movement has been the growing importance of ideas of fiscal austerity and control of expenditure. This rhetoric was not limited to the public sphere, to politicians, religious or community leaders (Buggenhagen 2012: 201–3); the discourse on austerity and the NGOs’ rhetoric on development and good governance is echoed by many ordinary people, women as well as men, even in poor suburbs. My interlocutors denounce ceremonial expenditure as irresponsible and in conflict with what they usually refer to as “good practice” or “good development practices”: that is, ultimately, economic rationality.

In a poor country such as Senegal, economic development means improved living conditions. It is a key sociopolitical goal, and also the way most of my

interlocutors⁸ perceive the future. Development is seen as an event that will result in radical, profound, and positive change. This change, which is still to come, will occur as soon as “the obstacles to development” have been overcome, after which economic rationality will prevail, and people will enjoy a better life. Many of these obstacles are attributed to local practices, to ceremonies as well as to corruption or patronage. As emphasized by Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1999) on the subject of West Africa, the same moral economy favors both corruption and ceremonial financial exuberance: gifts made as a result of a moral duty (such as solidarity, or thanks for service rendered), the importance of ostentation, redistribution, kinship relations, or interpersonal mutual aid networks. Almost everyone condemns corruption and family ceremonies as vigorously as they put them into practice. On the subject of corruption, Olivier de Sardan (1999: 48) evokes “the general feeling of helplessness in the face of an infernal mechanism”; this is comparable to what I have called my interlocutors’ feeling of perplexity. The problem is identical in the case of women’s exchange ceremonies: in both instances, particular local institutions prevent full realization of a universal moral ideal (economic rationality and development). The money that should be devoted to economic purposes is embezzled or wasted on lavish ceremonial expenditures. *Aada*, be it corruption or ceremonies, represents an inevitable obstacle that everyone wants to overcome, although no one knows how.

Aada in general, and ceremonies in particular, are also contrary to Islam and condemned in its name. Sufi leaders sometimes argue that money spent on ceremonies should instead be used for religious purposes, such as *zakat*⁹ (Buggenhagen 2012: 177). Mostly, however, the issue is not so much one of the allocation of funds per se as the fact that women’s exchange ceremonies are contrary to Islam as an order of value. In the late 1980s, religious leaders—Sufi as well as reformist—began issuing negative opinions on women’s expenses and clothing during religious celebrations and family gatherings, or even in everyday life. The discussions focused on the veil, of course,¹⁰ but also on the low-cut necklines of their robes (*boubous*), erotic dances (*sabar*), music, or the practice of appearing in public wearing sumptuous clothing and make-up (*sañse*) in family ceremonies (Heath 1992). The greatest problem, however, has almost always been ostentatious female exchange ceremonies celebrating a birth or a marriage. Reformist Muslims condemn women’s ceremonies and *aada* in general as pre-Islamic unholy practices. Sufi leaders are more moderate, but also denounce ostentatious and lavish spending on the same grounds (“God prohibits squandering”).

Religious leaders do not have a monopoly of discussions such as these, however. My interlocutors also condemn *aada* and the huge ceremonial expenditure in the name of Islam, but they rarely denounce ceremonial practices as inherently unholy. For the most part, they condemn them because the extravagant spending

8. Those who are not reformist Muslims.

9. *Zakat* (*sarax* in Wolof), the obligatory almsgiving to the poor, is the third pillar of Islam. In Senegal, Sufi brotherhoods collect *zakat* for their charity work (e.g., to help health centers, schools, or the poor).

10. Most women in Dakar are not veiled.



and ostentatious ceremonial exchanges of gifts contradict the temperance and restraint required of every Muslim. Ostentatious behavior and financial intemperance are viewed as *ëppal*, which means both excess and an excessive desire for fame and superiority over others. More broadly, ostentation and financial exuberance in marriage and birth ceremonies are attributed by many men and women, religious leaders and ordinary believers, to custom (*aada*): that is, as a local peculiarity that contradicts the universal principles of Islam.

From contradictions to hierarchy: Unavowed value

I began this article by quoting vintage Bill Clinton. In a spirit of comparative fairness, I should mention that on October 18, 2014, Macky Sall, the current president of Senegal, made a vivid speech in which denounced “wastefulness” (*gaspillage* in French) in family ceremonies as a fundamental problem in Senegal. Yet he is hardly the first. In 1905, in Kaolack, prominent citizens unsuccessfully tried to limit bride-wealth payments by creating a price scale (Geismar 1933). Over the last hundred years, many religious and political authorities have initiated failed attempts to keep ceremonial expenses under control (e.g. Robin 1947). In 1950, prominent members of the native community of Dakar (*Lebu*), who were mainly religious leaders, took the initiative to write a code reforming “custom” (*aada*) entitled the “Matrimonial Pact of Dakar” (*Pacte matrimonial de Dakar*), which included, among other things, capping expenses for marriage, birth ceremonies, and funerals (Anonymous 1951). Soon after this, the colonial administration adopted the code in the Jacquinet Decree of September 14, 1951. A few years after independence (in 1961), a law on ceremonial spending was passed on February 24, 1967 (Law No. 67-04); this law has been included in the Family Code since 1972. It is still in effect, even though its lack of effectiveness has never been denied throughout the past five decades. Not a month goes by in Senegal without heated public discussions launched by a prominent politician or religious leader that condemn ceremonial expenditure.

In other words, when it comes to ceremonial expenditure, any power, be it religious or political, local or national, takes a stand against the harsh protraction of women’s ceremonial exchanges in marriages and birth ceremonies. In this case, artificialism is directed not toward the transformation of society against the goodwill of individuals but to control of one element of local social life in order to realize universal values (economic rationality or Islam). The paradox is that everyone, and not only political or religious leaders,¹¹ agrees that ceremonial expenditures are harmful to the economic and moral wellbeing of individuals and the future of society in general. But over the last century, the countless condemnations and numerous attempts to ban or control them have had no effect at all.

So far, the situation may seem absolutely paradoxical, unless *aada* is considered as a sort of mysteriously powerful *deus ex machina* that pushes everyone to act reprehensibly. Women and men are puzzled by the contradictions at the core

11. Such leaders are renowned for the huge birth or marriage ceremonies performed in their families (except in the case of the still very limited numbers of reformist Muslims, such as Salafis).

of their own social life in the same way, I think, as we “Euro-Americans” are affected by the consequences of the autonomy and primacy of the economy, be they financial crises, climate change, or other issues. To follow Dumont’s ideas, I would argue that this apparent paradox, and the profound sense of perplexity and helplessness shown by my interlocutors in Dakar, is generated by the impossibility of recognizing value as such in the realm of discourse when it comes to women’s ceremonies. Or, to put it differently, the paradoxical moral contradictions that result in perplexity on the part of actors facing the limits of artificialism are indicators (for the anthropologist) that values are at stake. These configurations can’t simply be described as a contradiction between discourse and practice or even as a situation in which people are caught between competing values (cf. Joel Robbins’ contribution to this issue). Women’s exchange ceremonies are explicitly condemned in moral terms as “wastefulness,” as a local peculiarity (*aada*) that prevents the full realization of Islam and development. Condemnation of ceremonies represents the way contradiction is resolved in the realm of moral discourse and justification. My interlocutors condemn ceremonies when they have to justify them. Yet the primacy of ceremonies in Dakar’s sociality suggests that we (anthropologists) nevertheless need to acknowledge that women’s ceremonies relate to something inescapably valuable, albeit implicit or inarticulate in my interlocutors’ discourse—an unavowed value—hence their perplexity. This is a fundamental aspect of what Dumont called “an ideology.” In my opinion, Dumont’s formulas on ideology are usually cryptic and mislead a lot of his readers. However, the originality of his view is to claim that since the fundamentals aspect of an ideology are likely to be implicit, only comparison can evince the necessary, yet sometimes unavowed, relations by which the different parts of an ideology hang together (Dumont 1977: 19–20).

The discourse that sets ceremonies and economic development against each other is framed as a moral issue relating to the allocation of (scarce) financial resources: money is wasted on women’s ceremonies, whereas it should be devoted to economic development. I described above the intimate link between money and sociality. Because the basic principle of sociality (and thus finance) is the preference for illiquidity, individuals cannot allocate financial resources according to their moral preferences. Financial resources are elicited from others: the amount of money collected depends almost entirely on the social actors’ opportunity to synchronize relations for a given purpose. Here, moral discourse and the paradigm of choice eclipse value: from a financial point of view, women’s exchange ceremonies are more highly valued than economics.

As to Islam, it is not simply opposed to ceremonies as another potential alternative in the allocation of financial resources; the problem is that ostentatious behavior and financial exuberance in women’s ceremonies contradict the Muslim morality of temperance and restraint. Furthermore, the path of Islam¹² (*yoon*¹³) is thought to be universal, but above all represents the highest value order, that of absolute submission of the individual to God. It means abiding by what is commanded in

12. Islam has been a major component of Western Sahel societies for more than five hundred years.

13. In Wolof, *yoon* means both the way, the law, justice, and religion.



the divine words revealed in the Qur'an and the five pillars of Islam, and following the "highly recommended tradition" of imitation of the Prophet (*sunnah*), which includes lifecycle rituals such as that for a wedding (*takk*) or for naming a newborn (*tuddu*). According to all my interlocutors, the rituals recommended by Islam (*takk* and *tuddu*) are the only ones that need to be carried out when (respectively) a couple is married or a baby is born. However, Islam and women's exchange ceremonies actually combine in the ritual organization of the lifecycle. On the occasion of a marriage or the birth of a child, particularly a firstborn, a Muslim wedding or a Muslim naming ritual are always followed by costly ceremonies during which women exchange lavish gifts to honor kinship relations. In other words, despite what my interlocutors say ("the others' view"), the recommended rituals of Islam are never enough in themselves. To put it bluntly, ceremonial exchanges among women in birth and marriage rituals are the manner in which affinity and the succession of generations are construed as having value and become operative in the order of social relations (Moya forthcoming).

To sum up, not only should we acknowledge the value of women's exchange ceremonies, even though they may be condemned in the name of Islam and economic rationality, but Islam and women's ceremonies belong to two complementary orders of value in a hierarchical relation: on the one hand, that of Islam, which is a universal and transcendent order that defines the relationship between the individual and God, without whose blessing (*Baraka*) no action or relationship is possible; and on the other hand, at a subordinate level, the ceremonial agency of women, who operate relations, especially kinship. Women's ceremonial exchanges of money and clothing implement, as it were, the relations created (among men) in Muslim rituals under the auspices of God's blessing (*Baraka*), otherwise the relations created in the order of Islam will have no value and no effect as relations. Although it is not made explicit by social actors, it is a hierarchical relationship in which each element has to play its part, and which structures the sociality of Dakar.

This configuration is not a mere "coexistence of opposites . . . with no specific formula" between competing values, as in the case of economics and politics in Euro-America. In Dakar, the "formula" is a hierarchical one, even though it is not recognized as such by my interlocutors. In this case, moral contradictions eclipse hierarchy. In other words, the way values relate to each other cannot merely be described as a struggle, that is, a relation of power between them, even if moral contradictions dominate in both cases. From a comparative point of view, in the Euro-American case, economics and politics have been competing since the nineteenth century to fully realize the individual: that is, for the paramount position within an individualistic configuration. It a question of power. In Senegal, on the other hand, Islam and ceremonial exchanges in lifecycle events have been opposed for at least a century, however, individualistic values (Islam and economic development) are superior values that are encompassed in a hierarchical relation.

Hierarchy and change

In Senegal, the issue of ever-rising expenditure in family ceremonies is far from new. The phenomenon has been sufficiently striking that for more than a century,

religious and political authorities have struggled incessantly (and fruitlessly) to limit them. Ceremonial practices have evolved over time. However, the ethnography of the mid-1970s on the Wolof countryside around Senegal (e.g., Diop 1985; Rabain 1994) suggests that women's exchange ceremonies of birth and marriage were far more modest, but already costly, and had a structure that was similar to that observed in Dakar since 2000 (Buggenhagen 2012; Moya forthcoming). This does not mean that society does not change, or that urbanization has had only a superficial impact: on the contrary, the transformations brought about by the city are far from superficial or meaningless. For example, in Dakar, the urbanization process has almost wiped out the lineage system that was commonly thought of as the basis of kinship and social organization in this region. Kinship is nevertheless still essential in Dakar's sociality. The role of kinship networks in African cities is well known in the organization of residential systems, the urban integration of migrants, solidarity, or economic activities (Houseman 1995). In Dakar, however, kinship is not only a network capital that is mobilized as a resource to cope with other issues: on the contrary, every sociofinancial network is susceptible to being mobilized to finance women's exchange ceremonies. The urban situation did not generate, or even reveal, the "ceremonial phenomenon" itself; the transformations induced by the city fueled, and thus shed light on, a trend in Wolof sociality that was probably already there, albeit far less visible. Firstly, in a metropolis of three million inhabitants, the number of possible (financial) relations is extremely high: people can potentially take part in a large number of financial networks of various sizes. Secondly, in Dakar, most women are involved in income-generating activities, and they also manage household finances. Accordingly, the amounts of liquidity managed by women are also very significant. These two dynamics (more relations and more money) combine with the preference for illiquidity. Sociofinancial networks developed exponentially, as did the amounts collected by women for birth and marriage ceremonies.¹⁴

The amount of money spent on women's ceremonies is in itself an isolated feature. It is not proof of a fundamental difference between social formations. In Euro-America, marriage and birth ceremonies also generate a great deal of expense, but in Dakar, money and relations are two sides of the same coin: the financial system is the other side of sociality. In Dakar's pervasive sociality, agency hinges on the illiquidity preference and the synchronization of sociofinancial relations, and only lifecycle ceremonies, in which women honor kinship relations through ceremonial actions, successfully manage to synchronize all types of financial relations. The primacy of ceremonies and the subordinate position of the economic aspect in Dakar's sociality elicit an important—and yet overlooked—distinction between Senegal and Euro-America.

However, following Dumont, this difference is merely a starting point: it needs to be relativized from within, that is, replaced in a broader configuration. Women's exchange ceremonies do not appear to be morally valued: on the contrary, they are explicitly condemned. I have suggested that the primacy of women's exchange ceremonies over economics in Dakar's sociality leads to a distinction between morality

14. In his contribution to this issue, André Iteanu makes a comparable point about how change reinvigorates values that were previously subordinate, dormant, or hidden.



and values: women's ceremonies are an "unavowed value." Moral contradictions of this kind mark the contrast between the various levels of value and, possibly, the existence of a hierarchy that is a configuration in which partially incompatible conceptions not only coexist or impinge on each other, but are articulated within the same social formation.

Finally, the persistence and development of women's ceremonies illustrate how value systems actually limit artificialism, especially when it comes to unavowed values. But recognizing hierarchy does not amount to forgoing the will to change, whether it be in regard to lavish spending on women's ceremonies in Dakar, the primacy of the economic dimension in Euro-America, or any other subject. If there is a political stance to be found in Dumont's anthropology, it might be that awareness of the limitations that values impose on power (individual will or politics) is the very condition for effective action. It is worth noting that, thirty-six years after the first edition of his first book, *La Tarasque*, Dumont wrote a postscript ("Late generalization") about the persistence of hierarchical relations in individualist social formations. He concluded with a comment on Gregory Bateson's analysis of Alcoholics Anonymous (Bateson 1972: 309–37).¹⁵ According to Dumont, addiction is an expression of hierarchy in individualist terms, and AA is an example of the limits to and conditions for change. In Dumont's terms:

The principle is simple: the patient is doomed to fail as long as he feels able to tackle the bottle, which is equivalent to trying to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps. The necessary condition for getting out of this vicious circle is for the subject to understand that he cannot be defined independently of his dependency; and that solely the recognition of his self-will, the acceptance of a more comprehensive and powerful addiction, can allow him to escape his torment. (Dumont [1951] 1987: 237)

To summarize, according to Dumont, an alcoholic is confronted by a seeming paradox: on the basis of his ideals, he believes in his own free will and independence, but empirically he is an addict. And Dumont (1987: 238) concludes that "the necessary condition of his salvation is the full recognition of his addiction, before resting on another to overcome the former. If one can generalize, the lesson is harsh for the modern ego."

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15. He also mentions Weight Watchers.

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Une valeur inavouable: Economie, comparaison, et hiérarchie à Dakar

Résumé : Toute analyse anthropologique, selon Louis Dumont, a pour point de départ une comparaison: c'est une expérimentation qui, suscitant des différences,

apporte des idées et justifie un point de vue analytique. Sur quelle sorte de différence une expérience comparative peut-elle s'appuyer dans une métropole africaine globalisée comme Dakar ? Je suggère que l'autonomie et la primauté de l'économie en Euro-Amérique peut fournir le point de départ d'un contraste radical. Ce texte examine tout d'abord le travail de Louis Dumont sur l'économie comme une valeur en Euro-Amérique en relation au politique. Il porte ensuite sur Dakar, où l'argent et les relations sont les deux faces de la même médaille. L'étude des circuits financiers permet d'explorer la socialité dakaroise dans laquelle les échanges cérémoniels entre femmes sont plus valorisés que l'économie, tout en étant vivement condamnés comme des pratiques coutumières empêchant l'avènement du développement économique et de l'Islam. En confrontant ces contradictions morales à la primauté des cérémonies féminines sur l'économie, le texte propose de distinguer moralité et valeurs et de reconnaître la valeur « inavouable » des cérémonies féminines. Les contradictions de ce type signalent le contraste entre différents niveaux de valeur et l'existence d'une hiérarchie qui articule des valeurs contradictoires au sein de la même société.

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